Joaquin Murrieta

By John Pusateri

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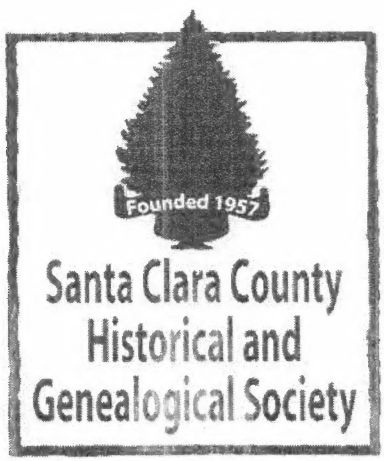
Notes:

- Original in possession of the Santa Clara County Archives, San Jose, California
- Scanned by the Santa Clara Historical and Genealogical Society



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District #9
John Pusateri

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Joaquin Murrieta and Rosita Carmel Feliz were born at the Real de Bayareca between Arispe and Hermosillo in the state of Sonora in the northwest corner of Mexico. Rosita was sixteen when Don Jose Gonzales, who was old and very rich, whose rancho was measured in square miles rather than acres, and who owned cattle and horses by the thousand, asked Ramon Feliz - Rosita's father - for her hand in matrimony. The elderly Feliz, poor and destitute, was happy at the prospect of such a union; but young, dashing Joaquin Murrieta, handsome and with the castillian strain of his ancestors plainly showing upon his clean cut features, shattered this dream. He and Rosita eloped and were immediately marr' at Arispe, Mexico.

The two young lovers, riding two horses, started up the Camino Del Diablo, that tragic road across the deserts of Arizona and southern California strewn with the bones of so many men and women in the days of the gold rush. This to them became a honeymoon trail. This journey ~~winded~~ wound up almost a year later in Santa Clara Valley, where Murrieta repaired shoes for a short time. Here, he became a very close friend of Charlie Berryessa, an early Santa Clara Valley land owner, who practically owned the northeast corner of the valley. These lands, embracing many wooded hills, were later to become, when Murrieta was a fugitive, a haven of refuge for the celebrated bandit.

In the spring of 1850, Joaquin Murrieta and his beautiful bride of almost a year, arrived at Saw-Mill Flat, a gold center. Murrieta was then nineteen years old. He was an intelligent young man, possessed with a mind of almost extraordinary quality. This is proven by the fact, that when he left his native land, Joaquin could not speak a word of English; one year after arriving in the California hills, he spoke the language almost without a trace of foreign accent.

At Saw-Mill Flat Murrieta took out a claim and set to work. This was

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quickly confisc ted by a group of unscrupulous men that had drifted in with the tide of humanity from the middle states and the east when the yellow ore was first discovered. The young Mexican patiently laid down another claim, earnestly believing in the honesty of the United State Government in giving justice to Mexicans and Americans alike within its jurisdictions. Murrieta's brain was clear of any malicious thoughts against the men that had treated him so unjustly, as he started once more at honest work. The same thing happened. Hardly had he commenced when the same group of men swept down upon him, this time threatning Joaquin's life. Fearing trouble Murrieta took up his tools and moved on another claim. By this time envious and coveting eyes were cast upon the comely and vivacious Rosita, whose dark eyes gleamed out the love and enchantment of the best of her race. That she had been molested by the same men that had driven her husband off his claims came to light when Murrieta, threatened the third time learned from Rosita the truth of their intentions. Alarmed, Joaquin asked why she had not told him before. Rosita returned that she was afraid trouble might ensue, causing more harm and grief.

Joaquin Murrieta now looked at the situation in a different light; his heart was heavy with foreboding. It was now that Frank Wilson, a friend of Murrieta and Rosita, who lived on an adjoining claim, came to visit them. The room of the little adobe was neatly whitewashed; the floor was of clean, hard earth; a picture of the Virgin Mary hung on the wall. Beneath it hung a crucifix. A door at the rear opened into a bedroom. The kitchen was behind the bedroom.

Wilson entered into a lengthly chat with his friends, discussing the threat upon Murrieta by the five fellows on the claim adjoining his. They had struck it rich, and there was a chance they might start trouble with Joaquin. Wilson asked if he was going to do something about it, for they were gradually

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infringing on his claim. Murrieta answered that he didn't know what to do, for there might be a fight and perhaps some one might be killed. Wilson rose and leaving said: "I think I can help you. There's some law in this country. I'll go into town and consult an attorney. He'll find a way to stop them".

Shortly after Wilson left, the five men that had jumped his claims before, fresh from the ditches, their clothes splotched with wet mud, came to the adobe and entered. Murrieta asked them their mission. The miners answered him harshly, threatened to put him off forcibly if he didn't leave peacefully. They, real Americans, did not want any dirty greasers around; greasers must leave that which belonged to Americans, that which the United States fought Mexico and bled for, to the Americans.

Murrieta was adamant. "I may be a Mexican", he shot back; but I am a man, not a coward! It is known this property is mine, and if you want it you will have to pay me for it!"

The five Americans were intent on trouble, and Murrieta's bold stand aggravated the intense situation. The one that acted as a leader, a huge glowering savage, at Joaquin's demand, in a loud menancing voice blurted: "Well, that's a bright idea. You're smarter fellow than I thought you were. Sure we'll pay you. Here's cash on the spot". His fist crashed into Joaquin's face. Murrieta went down but was up in a flash. He sprang for his bowie knife on the table, but was prevented from reaching it. He called to Rosita to get it. As she grasped the knife and flung herself upon the nearest miner; he turned like a madman, caught hold of her wrist and twisted it unmercifully until Rosita dropped it to the floor. Joaquin, though built like a champion athlete, went down under the terrific rain of fists. Finally he lay still upon the floor, boots smashing heavily against his

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sides and face. Blood trickled upon the floor from his nose and mouth. Joaquin knew no more.

Rosita fought like a tigress for her honor; but against their number she was like a kitten caught in a storm. She was overcome, and was taken by one of the men into the back-room; the others followed and the door slammed shut behind them.

On Wilson's return he found Murrieta unconscious. With cold water he restored him. Moments later he found out what had happened to his wife. He entered the bed-room; their was deathly silence about it. Upon the bed, lying still, a white pallor spread over her face, was Rosita. Joaquin picked her up and folded her to his breast, calling her endearing names. Rosita opened her eyes. The first word was the calling of his name, and the way she whispered it seared his heart. "Joaquin, hold me tight," she added. "I'm getting cold. It's growing dark". These were her last words. She died in Joaquin's arms.

Wilson heard Murrieta make the oath. "By the blood of Christ, they will pay for the harm they have done me, even if I have to follow them into the depths of hell".

From then on Murrieta became a self-styled patriot, his first idea of vengeance coming after the shameful treatment of his wife at the hands of these law-breakers. Murrieta left Saw-Mill Flat.

Some time later, prospectors looking for gold in a wild ravine came upon five skeletons. Lying about the ashes of an old campfire they had been bleached white by the sun. No one knew who these men had been; but one can conjure who they were. There was one clew to the cause of their death. Through each of the five skulls was a round hole made by a bullet. Months later Joaquin

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Murrieta, himself revealed he had killed them. He had taken revenge upon the men who outraged and killed his wife.

Murrieta returned to Saw-Mill Flat, then settled down quietly in Murphy's Diggings, hoping to forget the past and start all over again. He in partnership with an American, Bill Byrnes, an adventurer, a fighter and a gambler, ran a monte game. This is how Murrieta came to be attached to Byrnes, and who later ~~recognized~~ recognized Joaquin when a ranger under Captain Harry Love of Santa Clara California.

Joaquin made frequent trips to a little Mexican camp where his brother Jesus Murrieta worked as a miner on his placer claim. Joaquin was closely attached to his brother; and it was on one of these trips when Joaquin came back riding Jesus' only mule, that he was set upon by an American miner named Lang. Lang accused Joaquin of having stolen the mule from him. Joaquin tried to prove his innocence, and that the mule belonged to his brother Jesus, whom Murrieta insisted was an honest man. The result of this was that Jesus was hung to an oak tree the following morning, and Joaquin received thirty-nine lashes across his bare back. Joaquin saw his brother die. His eyes scanned the faces of all the men around the tree, faces that he was never to forget; and most of all Lang, the man that laid the lashes upon him and had caused his brother to be strung up.

Joaquin had taken his punishment with Indian stoicism. He had said not a word. Only his eyes had given a hint of what passed through his mind, a burning, unutterable hatred.

Some Mexicans, after the Americans left, cut Joaquin's bonds, applied an unguent on his wounds and helped him dress. They lowered Jesus body and took it with them into the hills and buried it in an unmarked grave. Murrieta was not seen for some time.

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After this Joaquin Murrieta was not just another Mexican, but a man to be feared. He became a demon in the flesh; eyes that once radiated friendliness and the joy of living, now emitted a diabolic light, throwing off the smouldering hate of his seared soul. On horseback, few humans were his equal.

Riding Indian fashion he was the best that Californians had ever had occasion to witness. To the Americans he was a bandit and a murderer. The Spanish and Mexicans alike admired and idolized him. To them he was a revolutionist and a champion of their race, a leader that fought against American domination and invasion.

When Murrieta began his life of vengeance he was twenty, and the late summer of 1850. He never killed merely for the pleasure of it, but glutted his vengeance on the men concerned in the outrages of Saw-Mill Flat and Murphys Diggings. Some of his threats have come down in their exact language and reveals a man as deadly as a rattlesnake. It was this deadliness and his dominant will power that enabled him to keep together the fighting men he gathered about him. This is proven in the way he kept his lieutenant, "Three Fingered Jack", the most murderous ruffian in his band, in cowed subjection. Many older bandits of minor importance, observing his organizing genius, and realizing his superiority in commanding, willingly fell under his orders.

Joaquin Murrieta crowded into the last three years of his life - twenty to twenty-three - one of the most lurid chapters in criminal history. Daring robberies and murders followed in close sequence, California rang with his name; and an unknown Mexican youth became the most famous figure of the day. The gold age was his back-ground, shameful treatment at the hands of the Americans, the spark that started the flame, and at a time when tumult and excitement reigned, with

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men mad for gold, and law and order forgotten.

Spanish and Mexicans at the different ranchos, through a net-work of spies organized to perfection by Murrieta, knew when their Robin-Hood and his men were near at hand. They gladly prepared saddled horses at the opportune moment, fresh for long distance rides.

Joaquin Murrieta struck at his enemies with such bold precision that once under his scrutiny they did not escape. His fame spread like the rays of a rising sun. His ruthless exploits were told in cabins and around camp-fires. He had become a synonym of terror; and soon miners feared to walk lonely mountain trails. The mark of the lariat, was one of the signs Murrieta left upon his victims; and very seldom, when a rope flew out from behind a boulder or a clump of brush, did it miss the mark it was intended for.

He ruthlessly exterminated all except two of the men that took part in his brother's hanging. Lang, actual leader of the gang, and the man that Murrieta wanted to kill badly, met death at the hands of Sam Green in a drunken brawl in a saloon. The other ruffian was hung by the law at Reno, Nevada.

Joaquin Murrieta activities in Santa Clara County centered around the Almaden district. Many times he and his roving men were seen riding away in the moonlight. Over hills and through gullies they galloped, like phantoms in the night, appearing and vanishing with swiftness that amazed the people at the country-side.

Many times Murrieta took refuge in the hilly and wooded stretches of Charly Berryessa's - the father of the present Avel Berryessa of Berryessa - rancho in the northeastern corner of the SantaClara Valley. He had become a very close friend of these early Spanish people, who had come in the valley with De Anza's

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expedition about 1776. One incident darkened the friendship of this celebrated bandit and one of the county's earliest families.

In San Joaquin Valley, Murrieta had lived for some time under the roof of Juan Berreyesa - kin of Charly Berreyesa - who was living there then. They were very good friends. Juan was one of Joaquins most trusted men, courageous and a suave young man. But coaxed by an American to betray Murrieta and receive one thousand dollars - part of reward money for the bandit's capture dead or alive- Juan plotted Murrieta's doom. But the young bandit, entering Juan's house from the rear, after having forgotten his gun, heard Juan and the American talking the plans over. Juan was going to walk Joaquin into a trap, and receive the one thousand dollars promised him. As the American left, Murrieta entered the room. Juan saw his danger and pleaded for mercy. This was to no avail, for Murrieta drew his knife and stabbed the young Spaniard through the heart. Murrieta suffered greatly at this murder, for he held high the esteem of the Berryessa.

Joaquin Murrieta at one time took as his wife Antonio Molinera, whose mother kept a little bake shop in a back street in San Jose. One evening Molinera told Joaquin that she was going to San Jose to visit her mother. To this Murrieta, who loved her, kindly consented. After some time, not hearing from her and growing alarmed over her unexplained absence, Murrieta, rode into San Jose. He went straight to his mother-in-laws bake shop. She told Murrieta that her daughter had not come to San Jose, and thus, did not know her whereabouts. Later the young bandit learned that his wife had run away to Los Angeles with another less famous bandit named Pancho Daniels. Murrieta swore to kill her, but died before he could carry out his threat.

Another Mexican girl, Maria Ana Benites, had lived with Joaquin Murrieta,

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when she ran away with a good looking young American gambler named Tom Baker and went to live with him in a secluded nook in the hills about the gold camp in Mariposa. Murrieta followed her and pumped six bullets into her body. He left her for dead; but she survived the bullets and lived twenty years after Joaquin's death in San Jose where she used to exhibit with great pride the scars that testified Murrieta's mad infatuation and revenge.

During the latter days of his reign, Murrieta was in San Jose. He arrived early in June 1853, at the ranch of Joaquin Higuerra, off the Mt. Pleasant Road near Mt. Hamilton. Here he remained in concealment for two weeks. Francisco Sicarro, foreman of the ranch, guarded him against danger.

One day Murrieta came down into San Jose and entered the Tivoli Gardens in the southern outskirts of the town. While drinking he was recognized by a Frenchman, the proprietor of the place. Murrieta shot him for fear of betrayal.

While back at the Higuerra Rancho, Joaquin sent out an Indian to San Jose for some whiskey; but learning from Sicarro that the fellow suspected whom he was and was not to be trusted, Murrieta quickly mounted his horse, overtook the Indian and killed him.

Toward the end of June, 1853, Murrieta with fifteen men left the Higuerra Rancho and following the coast road headed south. They traveled in great secrecy, riding by night and camping in secluded regions in the day time. It is said that they reached as far south as Los Angeles, but doubled back north, as sentiment against his depredations in that region had risen to fever heat. The State was now taking a hand in this serious threat, and meant to carry the notorious young bandit to earth. It was then said that Murrieta could master two thousand men under his command if he wanted to, and start wholesale killings

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as a strong revolutionists.

The committee on military affairs of the State Legislature in 1852 had voted a reward for $5000 for the capture of Murrieta, dead or alive. This proves the power this once unknown man wielded, and the serious threat he had become.

In July 1853, Captain Harry Love of Santa Clara, California, with twenty rangers assigned him by the state, started his hunt for the outlaw and his band. Captain Love stopped in San Jose for two days in which time he learned that Murrieta was two weeks ahead of him. He and his men immediately started south, and while in San Juan, learned from Joaquin's former wife, Molinera, who through her underworld associates kept informed of Murrietas moves, that the young bandit was camped at Arroya Cantova, a secluded canon in the San Joaquin Valley.

Captain Love immediately started south, and for a day marched into the Salinas plains; this was to give any possible spies of Murrieta, the impression that the American was going to Los Angeles. But under cover of darkness, Love doubled back to San Juan. The following morning he camped in a hidden canon and started east, toward Arroya, Cantova, that night.

Captain Love and his rangers came upon Murrieta in a hidden spot, July 25. In the fight that ensued, the Mexicans, caught unawares and with their band scattered, were thoroughly beaten. Three fingered Jack, Murrieta's Chief lieutenant, took to his heels across the gullys and hills, with Captain Love himself in pursuit. Joaquin Murrieta, yelling to his men in Spanish to save themselves if they could, leaped upon his saddleless horse and started away at break-neck speed.

Henderson, one of the rangers, took after Murrieta and wounded his horse. Again his six shooter flamed and the animal went over dead. Joaquin was thrown clear and lay stunned on the ground for a moment. He was up, but with great effort,

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and started to flee on foot. Henderson fired again and a bullet passed through the outlaw's body, just missing his heart.

Joaquin Murrieta accepted his fate with calm. Throwing his hands up, he said it was enough - he was as good as dead. Slowly he sank to one knee; then lay down, placing his face upon his fore-arm as if going to sleep. A moment later, he was dead. So passed a figure that had terrorized a state, for his activities had ranged from Siskiyou, the extreme northern end of California, to San Diego in the south. Joaquin Murrieta, who had gratefully remembered little acts of kindness, who held in warm esteem those who had been good to him, who hated those that had harmed him and whose hate was never appeased until he killed those that he had blacklisted, was now just a memory, just an actor who had played his fateful part and vanished from the stage.

Three fingered Jack was run down and shot between the eyes by Captain Harry Love. Joaquin Murrieta's head was cut off by Bill Byrnes, and was later exhibited with the hand of Three Fingered Jack all over the State.

Consultants: Mr. Narvaez, Southern Pacific Office.

Mr. Avel Berreyesa

Mr. Clyde Arbuckle, San Jose

"Robin Hood of El Dorado", by Walter Noble Burns.